

When Arthur J. Burks told me to put a wastebasket upon my head, I knew that one of us—probably both—was crazy. But Burks has a winning way about him—it’s said he uses loaded dice—and so I followed his orders and thereby hangs a story. And what a story!

You know, of course, how all this pleasant lunacy started. Burks bragged that he could give six writers a story apiece if only they would name an article in a hotel room. Considering the way New York furnishes its hotels—and remember Burks lived there—that doesn’t sound so remarkable. And so six of us, he tells me, took him up on it and trooped in.

The six were Fred “Par” Painton, George “Sizzling Air” Bruce, Norvell “Spider” Page, Walter “Curly-top” Marquiss, Paul “Haunted House” Ernst and myself. An idiotic crew if I do say it, wholly in keeping with such a scheme to mulch editors with alleged stories.

So Burks told me to put a wastebasket on my head, told me that it reminded me of a *kubanka* (Ruski lid, if you aren’t a Communist) and ordered me to write the story. I won’t repeat here the story he told me to write. It was clean, that’s about all you can say for it—although that says a great deal coming from an ex-Marine like Art. This wastebasket didn’t even look faintly like a *kubanka*. A *kubanka* is covered with fur, looks like an ice-cream cone minus its point and is very nice if you’re a Ruski. I wrote the story and I’ll tell you all about the right way to develop it, so don’t go wrong and find Art’s article (in that issue with the putrid-pink cover and bilge-green head) and see how he did it. I’ll show you the *right* way.

Burks told me to write about a Russian lad who wants his title back and so an American starts the wheels rolling, which wheels turn to gun wheels or some such drivel—and there’s a lot of flying in the suggestion too. Now I saw right there that Art had headed me for a cheap action story not worth writing at all. He wanted to do some real fighting in it and kill off a lot of guys.

But I corrected the synopsis so I didn’t have to save more than the Russian Empire and I only bumped about a dozen men. In fact, my plot was real literature.

The conversation which really took place (Burks fixed it in his article so he said everything) was as follows:

BURKS: I say it looks like a hat. A *kubanka*.

HUBBARD: It doesn’t at all. But assuming that it does, what of it?

BURKS: Write a story about it.

HUBBARD: Okay. A lot of guys are sitting around a room playing this game where you throw cards into a hat and gamble on how many you get in. But they’re using a fur wastebasket for the hat.

BURKS: A fur wastebasket? Who ever heard of that?

HUBBARD: You did just now. And they want to know about this fur wastebasket, so the soldier of fortune host tells them it's a *kubanka* he picked up and he can't bear to throw it away although it's terrible bad luck on account of maybe a dozen men getting bumped off because of it. So he tells them the story. It's a "frame" yarn, a neat one.

BURKS: But you'll make me out a liar in my article.

HUBBARD: So I'll make you a liar in mine.

So I started to plot the story. This hat is a very valuable thing, obviously, if it's to be the central character in a story. And it is a central character. All focus is upon it. Next I'll be writing a yarn in second person.

Anyway, I was always intrigued as a kid by an illustration in a book of knowledge. Pretty red pictures of a trooper riding, a fight, a dead trooper.

You've heard the old one: For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, for want of a horse the rider was lost, for want of a rider the message was lost, for want of a message the battle was lost and all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

So, it's not to be a horseshoe nail but a hat that loses a battle or perhaps a nation. I've always wanted to lift that nail plot and here was my chance to make real fiction out of it. A hat. A lost empire.

Pretty far apart, aren't they? Well, I'd sneak up on them and maybe scare them together somehow. I made the hat seem ominous enough and when I got going, perhaps light would dawn.

"That's a funny-looking hat," I remarked. The others eyed the object and Stuart turned it around in his hands, gazing thoughtfully at it.

"But not a very funny hat," said Stuart, slowly. "I don't know why I keep it around. Every time I pick it up I get a case of the jitters. But it cost too much to throw away."

That was odd, I thought. Stuart was a big chap with a very square face and a pocket full of money. He bought anything he happened to want and money meant nothing to him. But here he was talking about cost.

"Where'd you get it?" I demanded.

Still holding the thing, still looking at it, Stuart sat down in a big chair. "I've had it for a long, long time, but I don't know why. It spilled more blood than a dozen such hats could hold, and you see that this could hold a lot."

Something mournful in his tone made us take seats around him. Stuart usually joked about such things.

Well, there I was. Stuart was telling the story and I had to give him something to tell. So I told how he came across the hat.

This was the world war, the date was July 17, 1918, Stuart was a foreign observer trying to help Gajda, the Czech general, get Russia back into fighting shape. Stuart is in a clearing.

... and the rider broke into a clearing. From the look of him, he was a Cossack. Silver cartridge cases glittered in the sun and the fur on his *kubanka* rippled in the wind. His horse was lathered, its eyes staring with exertion. The Cossack sent a hasty glance over his shoulder and applied his whip.

Whatever was following him did not break into the clearing. A rifle shot roared. The Cossack sat bolt upright as though he had been a compressed steel spring. His head went back, his hands jerked, and he slid off the horse, rolling when he hit the ground.

I remember his *kubanka* bounced and jumped and shot in under a bush. . . .

Feebly, he motioned for me to come closer. I propped him up and a smile flickered across his ashy face. He had a small, arrogant mustache with waxed points. The blackness of it stood out strangely against the spreading pallor of death.

“The . . . *kubanka* . . . Gajda . . .”

That was all he would ever say.

Fine. The *kubanka* must get to General Gajda. Here I was, still working on the horseshoe nail and the message.

The message, the battle was lost. The message meant the *kubanka*. But how could a *kubanka* carry a message? Paper in the hat? That’s too obvious. The hero’s still in the dark. But here a man has just given his life to get this hat to the Czechs and the hero at least could carry on, hoping General Gajda would know the answer.

He was picking up the one message he knew the hat must carry. He had killed three men in a rifle battle at long range in an attempt to save the Cossack. There’s suspense and danger for you. A white man all alone in the depths of Russia during a war. Obviously somebody else is going to get killed over this hat. The total is now four.

I swore loudly into the whipping wind. I had had no business getting into this fight in the first place. My duty was to get back to the main command and tell them that Ekaterinburg was strongly guarded. Now I had picked up the Cossack’s torch. These others had killed the Cossack. What would happen to me?

So my story was moving along after all. The fact that men would die for a hat seems too ridiculous that, when they do die, it’s horrible by contrast, seemingly futile.

But I can’t have my hero killed, naturally, as this is a first-person story, so I pass the torch to another, one of my hero’s friends, an English officer.

This man, as the hero discovers later, is murdered for the *kubanka* and the *kubanka* is recovered by the enemy while the hero sleeps in a hut of a *muzjik* beside the trail.

The suspense up to here and even further is simple. You’re worried over the hero, naturally. And you want to know, what’s better, why a hat should cause all this trouble. That in itself

is plenty of reason for writing a story. Now while the hero sleeps in the loft, three or four Russian Reds come in and argue over the money they've taken from the dead Englishman, giving the hero this news without the hero being on the scene.

The hat sits in the center of the table. There it is, another death to its name. Why?

So they discover the hero's horse in the barn and come back looking for the hero. Stuart upsets a lamp in the fight, the hut burns, but he cannot rescue the hat. It's gone.

Score nine men for the hat. But this isn't an end in itself. Far from it. If I merely went ahead and said that the hat was worth a couple hundred kopeks, the reader would get mad as hell after reading all this suspense and sudden death. No, something's got to be done about that hat, something startling.

What's the most startling thing I can think of? The empire connected with the fate of the *kubanka*. So the Russian Empire begins to come into it more and more.

The allies want to set the tsar back on the throne, thinking that will give Russia what it needs. Germany is pressing the Western Front and Russia must be made to bear its share.

But I can't save Russia by this hat. Therefore I'll have to destroy Russia by it. And what destroyed it? The tsar, of course. Or rather his death.

The Czech army moves on Ekaterinburg, slowly because they're not interested so much in that town. They could move faster if they wanted. This, for a feeling of studied futility in the end.

They can't find the tsar when they get there. No one knows where the tsar is or even if he's alive.

This must be solved. Stuart finds the hat and solves it.

He sees a Red wearing a *kubanka*. That's strange because Cossacks wear *kubankas* and Reds don't. Of all the hats in Russia this one must stand out, so I make the wrong man wear it.

Stuart recovers the *kubanka* when this man challenges him. He recognizes the fellow as one of the Englishman's murderers. In the scrap, seconded by a sergeant to even up the odds, Stuart kills three men.

Score twelve for one secondhand hat. Now about here the reader's patience is tried and weary. He's had enough of this. He's still curious, but the thing can't go any farther. He won't have it.

That's the same principle used in conversation. You've got to know enough to shut up before you start boring your listeners. Always stop talking while they're still interested.

I could have gone on and killed every man in Russia because of that hat and to hell with history.

History was the thing. It thrust up its ugly head and shook a warning finger at me. People know now about the tsar, when and where he was killed and all the rest. So that's why I impressed dates into the first of the story. It helps the reader believe you when his own knowledge tells him you're right. And if you can't lie convincingly, don't ever write fiction.

Now the hero, for the first time (I stressed his anxiety in the front of the story) has a leisurely chance to examine this hat. He finally decides to take the thing apart, but when he starts to rip the threads he notices that it's poorly sewn.

This is the message in the hat, done in Morse code, around the band:

“*Tsar held at Ekaterinburg, house of Ipatiev. Will die July 18. Hurry.*”

Very simple, say you. Morse code, old stuff. But old or not, the punch of the story is not a mechanical twist.

The eighteenth of July has long past, but the hero found the hat on the seventeenth. Now had he been able to get it to Gajda, the general’s staff could have exhausted every possibility and uncovered that message. They could have sent a threat to Ekaterinburg or they could have even taken the town in time. They didn’t know, delayed, and lost the Russian tsar and perhaps the nation.

Twelve men, the tsar and his family and an entire country dies because of one hat.

Of course, the yarn needs a second punch, so the hero finds the jewels of the tsar in burned clothing in the woods and knows that the tsar is dead for sure and the Allied cause for Russia is lost.

The double punch is added by the resuming of the game of throwing cards into this hat.

But after a bit we started to pitch the cards again. Stuart sent one sailing down the room. It touched the brim and teetered there. Then, with a flicker of white, it coasted off the side and came to rest some distance away, face up.

We moved uneasily. I put my cards away.

The one Stuart had thrown, the one which had missed, was the king of spades.

Well, that’s the *Price of a Hat*. It sold to Leo Margulies’ *Thrilling Adventures* magazine of the Standard Magazines, Inc., which, by the way, was the magazine that bought my first pulp story. It will appear in the March issue, on sale, I suppose, in February. Leo is pretty much of an adventurer himself and, without boasting on my part, Leo knows a good story when he sees it. In a letter to my agent accepting my story, Leo Margulies wrote: “We are glad to buy Ron Hubbard’s splendid story *Price of a Hat*. I read the *Digest* article and am glad you carried it through.”

Art Burks is so doggoned busy these days with the American Fiction Guild and all, that you hardly see anything of him. But someday I’m going to sneak into his hotel anyway, snatch up the smallest possible particle of dust and make him make me write a story about that. I won’t write it, but he will. I bet when he sees this, he’ll say:

“By golly, that’s a good horror story.” And sit right down and make a complete novel out of one speck of dust.

Anyway, thanks for the check, Art. I’ll buy you a drink, plenty of pay, at the next luncheon. What? Well, didn’t I do all the work?

– L. Ron Hubbard

With over 250 published works of fiction totaling over four million words in every popular genre, L. Ron Hubbard was one of the most accomplished and prolific writers of the twentieth century. In 1980 and in celebration of fifty years as a professional writer, he penned the internationally-acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller, *Battlefield Earth*, a 428,750 word science fiction epic written in just eight months. That he would return a year later to write the 1.2 million word, ten-volume *Mission Earth* epic in eight months—with each volume becoming a *New York Times* bestseller—bears testament to him as a master storyteller.

GLOSSARY

Cossack: a member of a people of southern European Russia and adjacent parts of Asia, noted as cavalrymen, especially during tsarist times. Their uniform coat had silver cartridges lined across the chest. Each cartridge contained enough gunpowder for one shot of their muzzle-loaded gun.

Czech: people of Czechoslovakia, a country in Central Europe (now called the Czech Republic). The Czech lands were under Habsburg rule (Austrian Empire) from 1526, later becoming part of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary. The independent republic of Czechoslovakia was created in 1918, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I.

Ekaterinburg: a city on the eastern slope of the Ural Mountains, a major industrial center and a station on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Emperor Nicholas II and his family were held captive in the city by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution and were killed here in 1918.

Gajda: Radola Gajda (1892–1948); a Czech military commander and politician.

house of Ipatiev: Ipatiev House; a merchant's house in Ekaterinburg where the former Emperor Nicholas II of Russia and several members of his family and household were executed. The house was demolished in 1977 and the magnificent "Church on the Blood," with many auxiliary chapels and belfries, was built there after the fall of the Soviet Union.

kubanka: a hat worn by Imperial Russian soldiers consisting of a wide band of black sheep wool with a flat top.

lid: a slang term for a cap or hat.

mulch: cheat someone out of something, especially money.

muzjik: a Russian peasant.

Nicholas II: Nicholas II of Russia (1868–1918); last Emperor of Russia, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Finland. He ruled from 1894 until his forced abdication in 1917. Nicholas proved unable to manage a country in political turmoil and command its army in World War I. His rule ended with the Russian Revolution of 1917, after which he and his family were executed by Bolsheviks in July 1918.

Reds: political radicals or revolutionaries who incite or endorse sweeping social or political reform, especially by the use of force, as a member of the Russian Social Democratic party that favored revolutionary tactics to achieve full socialization and seized supreme power in Russia during the Revolution (1917–1920) for the purpose of setting up a workers' state.

torch: a valuable quality, principle or cause that needs to be protected and maintained; literally, a stick of wood dipped in wax or with one end wrapped in combustible material, set on fire and carried, especially in the past, as a source of light.

tsar: (Russian, also tzar) shortened form of *tesar*, from Latin, Caesar; a male monarch or emperor, especially one of the emperors who ruled Russia until the revolution of 1917.

Western Front: during World War I, one of the two main areas of fighting, located in northeastern France. It consisted primarily of trenches many miles in length with German and Austrian troops on one side and the nations allied against them (England, France, the US and others) on the other side.